

WARREN
MAGAZINE

GIANT CHRISTMAS ISSUE!

CREEPY

CREEPY
#86

FEB 1973

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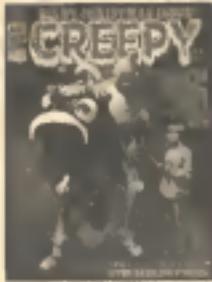
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CREEPY

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what his step-father had done to Momma. So,
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present for her. It involved an axe and dad!

Dear Uncle Creepy...

Frankly, I didn't expect much from CREEPY #84. Theme issues have a tendency to scrape the bottom of the barrel, literally. This should have been especially true of an all-sports issue. But I was pleasantly surprised.

Nothing in the issue could be classified as great, but it was generally on "high average" quality.

Was Carmine Infantino's issue really this artwork was uniformly beautiful, even disguised behind the hands of various inkers.

The Rich Corben and Leopold Sanchez offerings were also good and for a change, all the stories were well-written!

Congratulations!

BRIAN CADEN
Cincinnati, Ohio

I'd like to comment on one thing in CREEPY #84 that disturbed me.

Carmine Infantino pencilized four out of six stories, and although I enjoy seeing his work, I'd rather see it without the influence of another artist.

Particularly in the cases of Walt Simonson and John Severin, their inking only obscured Infantino's work.

Let's have one or two stories done completely by Infantino, and let Simonson and Severin do work on their own.

BDB LAMITIE
Delmar, N.Y.

A one-word description of #84 would be "fantastic". The art in "Hitler's Wind" was great. Without reading the story by just looking at the pictures, you feel like you're watching a real game.

"Menace, Anyone?" another "updated" story involving tennis and zombies was simply great!

"Relic" was like "Hitler's Wind". You could just look at the pictures and watch a ball game. Using robots as players and grenades as balls was a stroke of genius. It was the type of story you don't expect to see in a typical horror magazine, but Warren magazines are not typical. They're in a league of their own!

"The Mummy's Victory" was really funny. I wonder if the Cleverton museum could lend the mummy to the Detroit Lions. They sure could use such an "active" player.

EDWARD WOJCIK
Detroit, Mich.

The Detroit Lions, heh? Not a bad idea. Edward, maybe you'll read that story in CREEPY's next sports special.

"The Mummy's Victory" was my favorite story in CREEPY #84. Roger McKenzie proved he is capable of a tight touch in his writing (H�ngus!). And no one but Rich Corben would have been suited to draw it. I'm not even disappointed by the absence of color!

"Menace, Anyone?", including its political implications and its sentimentality, was a hackneyed effort. I know David McDevine can do better.

"Relic" was overdone, but naming the first robot baseball player Jackie was a stroke of genius.

I'd like to see Walt Simonson and Dick Giordano do solo stories, not to mention John Severin, and more stories by Bruce Jones. And I'm very pleased at seeing Warren stories by "superhero" color comic writers like Steve Englehart, Gary Bates, and David Micheline.

JULIO REY
Miami, Fla.

For whatever reason, the sports issue, CREEPY #84, lacked imagination. There wasn't a basic story line in the issue that wasn't predictable to the point of cliché.

"The Mummy's Victory" however was an enjoyable bit of absurdity. Rich Corben's art enhanced Roger McKenzie's tongue-in-cheek scripting to perfection.

"Hitler's Wind" benefited from deft, evocative scripting even if the plot has been overdone. McKenzie maintained excellent mood, through use of the bat boy as narrator. The artwork was also fine, largely because Walt Simonson's heavy inks outweighed Infantino's pencils.

"Till Hell Freezes Over" was a nice tribute to EC with its poetic justice ending. The setting was too far-fetched to be believable, however.

"Home Stretch" again the EC ending. C'mon, let's have a little originality. The use of double narrators was a nice touch though.

In closing, I'd like to mention that the teaming of Carmine Infantino with strong inkers, is the best policy to follow. The most successful Infantino art of the issue resulted from inkers like Simonson or John Severin, whose own styles are prominent. You might even try a really ornate inker like Gonzalo Mayo.

EDD O'REILLY
Ada, Ohio

You asked for it, Ed. Check out EERIE #81's "The Bride of Kong" for some really spectacular Mayo inkling of Infantino's pencils.

I just had to write and say that CREEPY #84 was the best issue I've ever read!

My favorite story, by far, was "Relic". I almost cried at the ending. Face it, Roger McKenzie knows how to tell a superb story. And the art by Carmine Infantino and John Severin was great!

The other stories were excellent too! CREEPY is going strong!

ROBERT KRAKOWSKI
Auburn, Mass.

Quite an issue! The cover alone would make anyone buy CREEPY #84!

I am both a horror fan and a sports fan, and I've been reading CREEPY since #50. #84 was by far the best issue Warren has put out.

The first story, "Hitler's Wind" was a classic—story, art, everything—and I hope to see more like it in future issues.

"The Mummy's Victory" was a good blend of horror, humor and sports, and "Till Hell Freezes Over" was another classic, the ending was especially shocking.

"Menace, Anyone?" was a serious look at things which may even be going on today, while "Relic" was a frightening glimpse of the future.

A well-rounded, enjoyable issue!

Keep it up!

JESS STOTT
Tulsa, Okla.

CREEPY #84 was unusual. I read on the letters page that there will be an all-war and an all-monster CREEPY also. This new trend is like an album, presenting one central idea in varied ways. The cover by Ken Kelly was eye-catching, one solitary pitcher hurling a grenade at the reader. An excellent choice of color on that cover it felt like baseball season!

It occurred to me to find Rich Corben's artwork in CREEPY #84. I thought this genius was only doing summer and Christmas special issues! Needless to say, I was delighted. The "Mummy's Revenge" story was great too. A revived mummy winning a football game for a small college team!

The Leopold Sanchez art on "Home Stretch" was some of the best he's done, especially the panel he signed.

The final piece, "Relic," is truly incredible. Futuristic baseball played with robots and grenades! Out of this world!

The art was beautiful on all four stories penituted by Carmine Infantino but I'd like to see him work alone from now on.

Bruce Jones had no stories in CREEPY #84 but he's a fantastic writer who you'd better not lose.

STEPHEN PIROS
Edison, N.J.

I really enjoyed Ken Kelly's cover for CREEPY #84. The green background was such a bright, unusual (for a magazine) color, it flashed on the newsstand like a neon sign.

The pose is dramatic and well-rendered but I have one quibble: the color of the robot's face doesn't really look metallic; instead he looks like he's swallowed a bottle of poison, or is choking on a chicken bone, making his face turn green.

I'm not even a sports fan, but Kelly's cover sparked my curiosity about the inside contents. That's quite an achievement in itself!

MIKE PURDIE
Los Angeles, Calif.

Who would've thought that an all-sports issue of CREEPY would be among the best magazines Warren has put out in the past few years? But it was!

A great deal of credit goes to the old master Carmine Infantino. My impressionable years were spent reading his work, and his talent has been sorely missed.

"Till Hell Freezes Over" was my favorite tale in an excellent issue. Steve Englehart's plot was chillingly realistic and entirely possible like a good disaster movie, the fear built to an inevitable climax.

David Micheline's "Menace, Anyone?" had a little something extra to say, and said it well.

Roger McKenzie's four efforts ranged from very good to mediocre. "Hitler's Wind" however featured absolutely exquisite artwork. Whoever had the idea of teaming Walt Simonson with Infantino is a genius. Simonson's extremely art style meshed well with the solid storytelling ability of Infantino. I was most impressed with Walt's ability with tone, the panels literally leaped off the pages at the reader.

"Relic" the futuristic story, was nicely handled and I found the ending very effective. John Severin's beautiful mink totally overshadowed the pencils, but it was still a once-in-a-lifetime treat. I'm sure comic fans relished.

I really enjoyed Ken Kelly's obituary cover, and would like to see it made into a poster.

FRED HEMBECK
Buffalo, N.Y.

That's one wish we can grant, Fred. That poster's available through Captain Company in a large 28" x 36" size. See page 49.

DEAR UNCLE CREEPY

Old Warren Publishing
145 E. 32nd Street
New York, N.Y. 10016

MILE END ROAD IN THE INFAMOUS MILE END DISTRICT WAS OLD, DARK, VIOLENT, AND POOR. A DEPRESSING PLACE YOU'D WLL GIVE WIDE BIRTH TO.



AND DEPRESSING THE MORE SO ON CHRISTMAS EVE. ESPECIALLY IF YOU HAD TO WORK AND WORK LATE, RUNNING BEHIND SCHEDULE ALL THE WHILE.



A NOGGIN at MILE END

STORY BUDD LEWIS/ART. LEOPOLD SANCHEZ





...THRILLED
THE WORLD OVER
AND MADE ME
A GENTLEMAN
OF NO MEAN
HOLDIN'S

LADIES
AND GENTLE-
MEN, I GIVE
YOU, THE
WORLD FAMOUS
THE
VORAMBIE...



G-SHILLING!
OH, SURE...
YES, INDEED

FINE--Y-E-S
I JUST
REAL PHINE

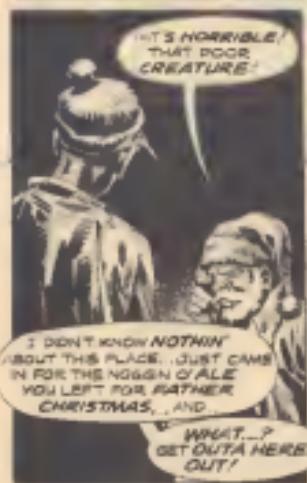
ONE OF THE RAREST
CASES OF FREAK ATTRACTION
IN CARNIVAL HISTORY

MY GOD

IT'S A... A SIDESHOW
A FREAK ATTRACTION?

PT BARNUM HIMSELF
OFFERED ME 20,000 POUNDS--
BUT I NEVER SELL HIM

HIS NAME IS
MUGGIN'S AND HE'S TEN
YEARS OLD. BOUGHT HIM
NEW BOOTS OFF HIS MAN





WELL, THEN, MASTER MUSKIN, SINCE THIS IS YOUR FIRST CHRISTMAS, WHAT CAN I GIVE YOU TO MAKE YOU VERY HAPPY?

AND I COULDN'T SEE THE DISGUST OR FEAR WHEN THEY LOOK AT ME.

CROOKEN THIS IS A REAL SANTY SACK MADE WITH A LOT OF MAGIC AND LOVE. ITS MAGIC LASTS UNTIL THE DAWN OF CHRISTMAS MORNING.

HAPPY? I THINK... IF, PERHAPS, I HAD A DARK CELLAR TO HIDE IN SO PEOPLE COULDNT SEE HOW EASILY I AM.

IT'S STILL GOT A GOOD LOAD OF MAGIC LEFT IN IT, EVEN THOUGH IT'S WORKED VERY HARD ALL NIGHT.

LIES AND MONSENSE!

I'D ONLY GIVE UP THE BOY IF HE WAS NO USE TO ME!

THEN... THEN ALL I CAN DO IS LET THE BOY WISH FROM THE SACK.

HE EARNED IT HIMSELF, AND YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO DENY HIM HIS FOND-EST CHRISTMAS WISH, RIGHT?

HA HA HA! GIVE HIM WHAT YOU WANT. WHATEVER YOU GIVE THE CREATURE, I'LL TAKE FOR MYSELF WHEN YOU LEAVE.

THIS SACK IS MINE! AND EVERYTHING YOU CAN WISH OUT OF IT IS YOURS!

YOU JUST GIVE ME THE BOY! A FAIR TRADE! MORE THAN FAIR!

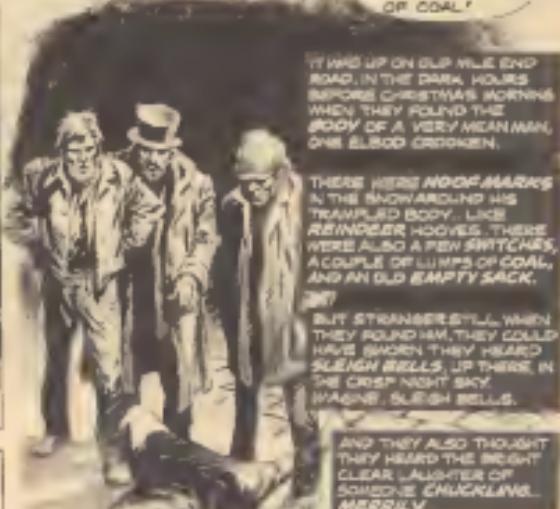
THE MINUTE I CAN'T TURN A COIN ON HIS FRAUDS-NESS, YOU CAN HAVE HIM!

GO AHEAD, PLAY SANTA CLAUS WHEREVER!









THE COMIC BOOKS

By Joe Brancatelli

LESS IS MORE

Enigmatic California Governor Jerry Brown gathered rounds of publicity from the less-is-more stance he adopted during his quixotic campaign for the Democratic Presidential nomination. But both the hype and the substance of the less-is-more doctrine quietly went the way of most campaign rhetoric as soon as Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford geared up their publicity machines for the quadrennial "Fromme More Services and Lower Taxes No Matter What" derby otherwise known as the presidential elections.

Now I'm certainly not going to muse about the politics of America here—all you Americans can jump into the Pacific Ocean for all we New Yorkers care about you anymore—but I am quite willing and even eager to consider less than a short-term panacea for what ails the comic-book industry. Me, I believe nothing will save mass-market comics as we now know them, but application of less is more might save all漫畫 for a couple of years.

As opposed to the bedrock American belief that more of anything is presumably better than less of anything, less is more recognizes the equally bedrock notion of a point of diminishing return. While much of the American economy is based on the notion that big volume is always reward, less is more says it is often times destructive to do less, to produce less, to sell less, because—in the long run—your return will be greater than had you done more, produced more, sold more.

Being as totally steeped in traditional American values as they are, comic-book producers have naturally followed the *more-is-more's-a-rite* theory, blindly in total disregard for what is actually happening in their marketplace. Blithely tramping down the more-is-allways-better road, comic-book companies always managed to produce new titles at

every turn—even though doing so depressed the margin and profits of the new titles and reduced the sales and profits of the existing ones. Like so many other Americans, comic-book moguls have constantly been blindsided by the sheer dint of volume to the detriment of the bottom line.

For example, Marvel published only one comic book starring *Spider-Man* several years ago. It sold, let us say, X number of copies and made Y profits for a cost of Z dollars. By adding a second title, *Marvel Spider-Man*, Marvel thought it could sell X + X copies and make Y + Y profits for a cost of Z + Z. What happened, however, was that the two *Spider-Man* titles sold only 3/4X + 1/2X and made a profit of only 3/4Y + 1/2Y. The cost was the full Z + Z, though.

That's what we call diminishing return, folks. Rather than get a full X worth of sales and Y worth of profits from the new investment of Z dollars, Marvel got a diminished return on its second investment and a reduced return on its original investment. Similarly, when Marvel then added a third *Spider-Man* book, it was paying $Z+Z+Z$ dollars to do so, but only getting something like $50X/3+50Y/3+10Z/3$ sales and only $50Y/3+10Z/3$ profits.

I chose Marvel for that little demonstration not because it is the only comic-book company ignorant of diminishing return—god knows, it is not—but because it conveniently manages to be the most cash-in on its floating of it. Marvel actually has three *Spider-Man* titles now when you count *Marvel Team-Up*—which always features the Web-Slinger—and each individually sells fewer copies per issue than the previous one.

than what the original Spider-Man title sold in a one-book market. Granted, the combined total sales of the three books are higher than the one book's sales, even were, but the three books aggregated return less profit than the one Spidey.

book did during its heyday in the late 1960s

All of which brings us to last issue's and its eminent desirability for comic books. What has happened to Marvel's three Spider-Man issues, happens in a larger sense to the comicbook macrocosm. All titles compete against each other and take readers and profit away from each other. Moreover, because of the vagaries of the magazine market we discussed in previous columns, there is only a limited amount of space available on retail display racks—distributors estimate there is room for only about four of every 10 comics published today.

So the question then is, why produce all those additional comics at the first place, comics that will never sell because they will never be seen? The old argument that you have to overproduce to sell notwithstanding, there is no reason to be glutting the market. Distributors say they can only distribute four of every 10, so why give them 10? Give them four because that's how many you know they can distribute.

What I'm proposing is not a reduction in the print run of comic-book titles. That would result in only a marginal saving, since the big cost today, despite rising newspaper prices, remains "start-up" dollars needed to produce even one copy of any title.

What I suggest is that the companies cut the number of titles they produce down to the bone, down to the tried-and-true best sellers. If a company publishes 60 titles now, let it cut back to the 15 or 20 most successful ones. With the additional 45 titles out of the way, not only will you be saving the costs of producing these comics, you'll be giving your best sellers a chance to improve their sales performance. And that's what it's all about.

For example, if a distributor is committed to giving a retailer only 240 comic books per delivery, he'll probably give him four copies each of those 60 titles. If, however, a company only prints 15 titles, chances are the distributor will be more generous.

tributor will give perhaps 15 of each instead. And since the titles around are best sellers, those extra 11 copies will probably sell better than the copies of the fringe titles that once cluttered the stands.

What I'm saying, in a nutshell, is this: Ed will be willing to wager that if Marvel and National each cut their number of titles by 50 or more percent, their profits would not only increase in percentage of sales, but also in terms of actual dollars. Sales of the remaining titles might improve from 40 per cent to maybe 60 or 70 per cent of the press run without adding a dime to the cost.

I'm sure that the total number of all comics sold won't decrease either. Given the better display, the total sales of these 15 or so best sellers should easily match the total sales of 60 titles which were never displayed properly.

And for National and Marvel, both fighting and loving battles with their bottom lines, a 50 per cent or more cutback in titles and costs with no loss of total sales would be very helpful.

So take heed out there. Jerry Brown was right. Less is more—at least for starters.

One caveat, though: Knowing the turkeys in the comic-book business, the authors they cut back salaries and see sales and profit increases in the remaining books, they'll wrongly interpret it as a new comic-book boom and reinstate the old rates.

That'll put us right back where we started.

卷之三

See *Brownfield* in *Index* to *parents* and *names* for *John* and *John* *Paddison*, who was *not* a *delegated* *trustee* of *trust* *trust* *parents* *but* *was* *an* *agent* *of* *the* *1938* *will* (*American
Attorneys' Practice Manual*, *Probate and
Succession* *Excellence*, *September* *1940* *Supplement* *entitled* "*W. T. Gandy
After the Fall*," a *lengthy* *and* *informative* *discussion* *regarding* *the* *national* *delegated
agents* *function*).

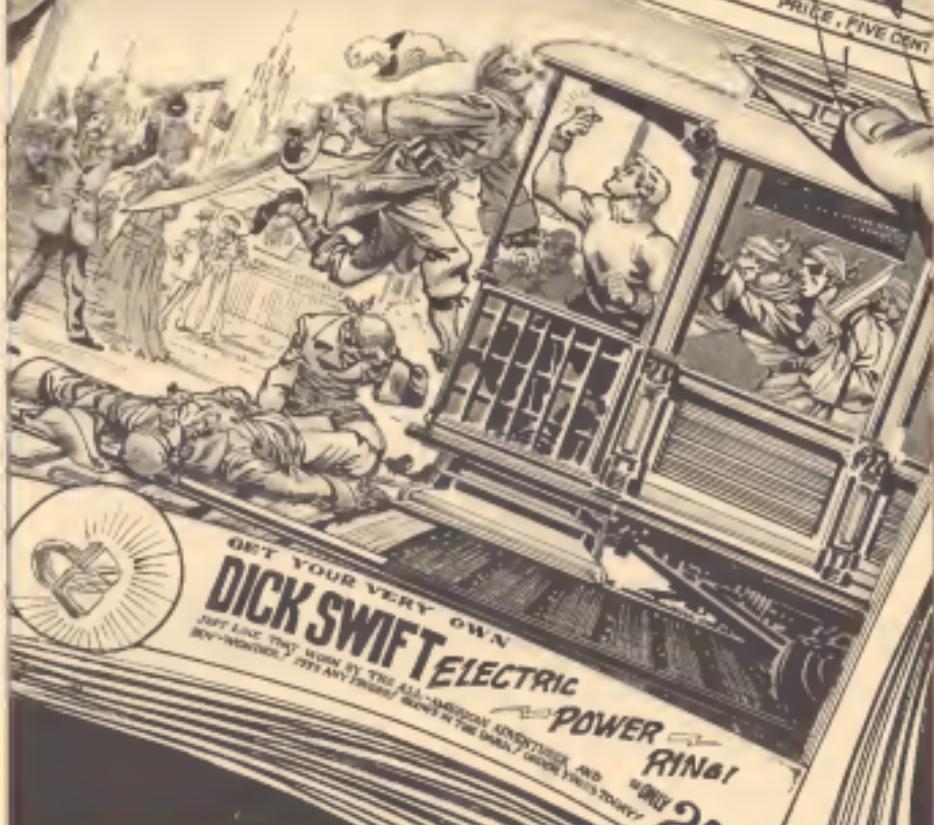
SHOW MR. MUSIC!
AIN'T DICK SWIFT
SOMETHIN' THE WAY
HE THROTTLED THE
TAR CUTTA THOSE
RAFSCALLION
TROLLEY PIRATES!

YES, SIR... WITH THAT
MAGICAL THING HE'S
THE ALL-AMERICAN
BOY, PETER!

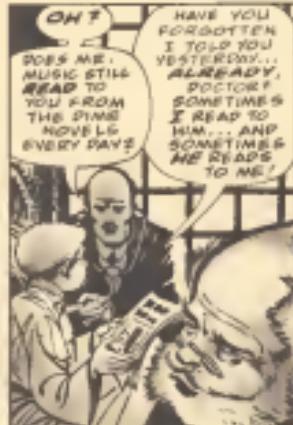
DICK SWIFT AND HIS ELECTRIC POWER RING!

NEW YORK, DECEMBER 4, 1907

PRICE, FIVE CENT



GET YOUR VERY OWN
DICK SWIFT ELECTRIC
POWER RING
ONLY 25.
JUST LIKE THIS! WORN BY THE
ALL-AMERICAN ADVENTURER,
BOY-WONDER, THIS ANYWHERE
BEGINS TO SPARK, GIVE YOURS TODAY!





WILL YOU REAP
TO ME, MR. MUSIC...
TELL ME... OF DICK
SWIFT'S LATEST
EXPLOITS...?

IT WILL BE MY
MOST PROFOUND
PLEASURE,
YOUNG GIRL!

YOU JUST SIT
BACK, RELAX...
AND ENJOY!

Night fell hard upon Gotham. It's darksome
red cloaking the foul deeds of the
evil denizens within?

In his wonderous all-electric laboratory, Dick Swift was busy keeping watch on the city with his incredible electric spy screen! Dick's inventions told him all was well!



They could not detect the muffled screams of piteous Pearl Pureheart and her half-breed, half-sister, Wanda One-Just!

Dick's brain pattered and his thoughts raced with the speed of pure electrical lightning! Which sister should he save? He had always been partial to pure Pearl's blonde looks... but there was much to be said for Wanda's one last, too!



The answer came to him like an electrical shock... and swiftly, Dick Swift used his magical magical electric power ring to invent an electrically-powered flying machine!

Dick Swift zoomed over Gotham's rooftops with lightning-like speed! He scooped up the enraged Pasta pusher in one deft motion, and watched smugly as the deadly perils bore towards his long-time female companion!

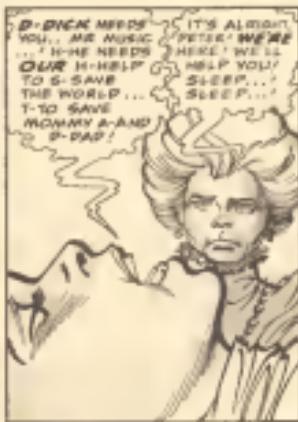


Yet, even in the boy marvel swooped to a perfect two-point landing, he heard the sickening sound of a barnacle cleaving through crackling bone... and the rumble of a speeding subway clamping along on an unalterable course!



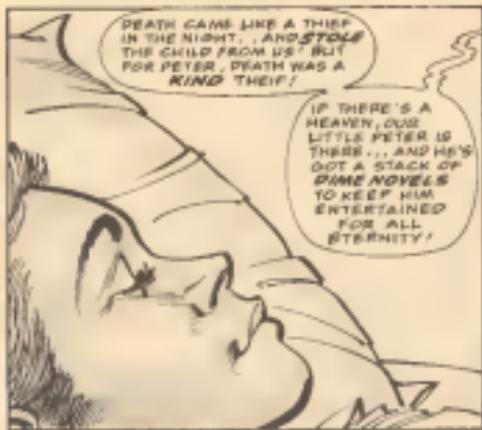
In a moment of confused madness, Dick looked upwards towards where pure Pearl had been died, and was instantly spattered with something akin to Luigi's famed pasta sauce!!











FRIGHT FILMS

REGULAR 8
& SUPER 8

FRANKENSTEIN MEETS THE WOLFMAN



High on the Gaspé Peninsula, a small eccentric world is trying to survive. But Frankenstein must save it and succeeds in time for the living creature to do battle with the Wolfman. Lots of Lightning, fangs, and action galore. Fright between the two stars is one of horror's most bizarre scenes. Starring Boris Karloff as Frankenstein and Lon Chaney as Wolfman. \$22.27-17.95. RUPPER 6 ONLY

DOOM OF DRACULA



Stacy Keach portrays a war novice soldier who becomes the romancer to Count Dracula. He brings the vampire back to his native town to help the oddly dislocated members. Keach, however, Keach realizes he has made a mistake as Dracula turns on him. John Carradine, Peter Cushing, and Peter Lorre star. \$22.27-17.95. RUPPER 6 ONLY

THE INVISIBLE MAN



This is it! The original motion picture featuring the most classic character in science fiction. The great Claude Rains as the Invisible Man, bringing his special effects by Ray P. Jones, which show more than 1000 special effects. \$14.95. RUPPER 6 ONLY. A terrific experience! A chilling, frightening film one of the all-time greats. \$22.27-17.95

HOUSE OF FRANKENSTEIN



Follow-up feature to "House of Dracula." Keach stars as scientist disguised as Count von Stoltz as he practices the world over in search of the Frankenstein monster. Keach is the best, most frightening, if not the best. But then, consider! For the lead man arrives on the scene. Is destiny the doctor and the new patient? \$22.27-17.95. RUPPER 6 ONLY

THE ORIGINAL MUMMY



One of Karloff's most frightening performances. The original "Mummy" is back! That night he comes back to life after many years of being buried in the Egyptian desert under the Egyptian. There, he begins the re-animation of his postpone Egyptian mummies. \$22.27-17.95

THE MUMMY'S GHOST



There is an exciting sequel to "The Mummy." Tom Conway plays the man all raised with his son, as he becomes a scientist gathering information about the Egyptian. And as he does, he falls for the young scientist who is a girl in 1930s Egypt! This Mummy is more frightening than the original one. \$22.27-17.95

INCREDIBLE COLOSSAL MONSTER HOME MOVIES

I WAS A TEENAGE WEREWOLF



One of the most popular movie ever made is back! A young boy with a preoccupation. He is taken to a werewolf hang out. But the doctor Adams is keeping an antipathetic eye on the boy. The doctor's young man is convinced he is preoccupied that he is a werewolf. Then, why is he not a werewolf? \$22.27-17.95

RETURN OF THE VAMPIRE



This is the big one! Van Helsing is resurrected in horrific shock as Boris Karloff portrays the blood-sucker who subjugated a longago woman. But then, he's back to do it again! \$22.27-17.95

RETURN OF DRACULA

MAN-MADE MONSTER



A sequence of two past horror action. "Frankenstein" gathers a man to create a man and it is a success. Andi destroys the body and through the use of an strange science, he creates the man. Andi is the Frankenstein in no longer human. But because he is a science monster. \$22.27-17.95

THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME



A classic of Hollywood. The star of the show is the hunchbacked man, Charles Laughton as the hunchy, misshapen hunchback called Quasimodo. This picture is full of action, drama, love, and the great literature. And the hunchback, that hunchy, the young girl in the Francis of pure & simple. \$22.27-17.95

TASTE THE BLOOD OF DRACULA

STRAIT-JACKET



From Christopher Lee the legend Dracula. And in this film has unique special effects, including the most macabre and most frightening. Lee is the immortal count. Here he travels from Transylvania to London. His plan is to revenge himself on the man who destroyed his wife. And then he does. \$22.27-17.95

THE BEAST WITH FIVE FINGERS



Peter Lorre stars in this macabre film. In this film, he is the killer and very frightening. But when he is given to the mad scientist, his great hands become instruments of sadism and terror. And when he is the "Beast with Five Fingers." Lorre as the beast, here with a fine supporting cast. \$22.27-17.95

HE SURE DNDN'T LOOK MUCH LIKE SANTA CLAUS... NOT AT FIRST GLANCE... BUT THAT DNDN'T MATTER. NO SIR, THAT DNDN'T MATTER. ONE DARNED BIT.

BILLY JONES! GOTTA PACKAGE HERE FOR BILLY JONES! WHERE IS BILLY, NOW I WONDER--?

HERE I AM, SANTA! OVER HERE--!

WHAT MATTERS IS THE FACT THAT TOMMY... THIS MORNING... THIS HOUR... THIS MINUTE... IS CHRISTMAS...

OH, YES! HERE YOU GO, BILLY, BOY! AND A MERRY CHRISTMAS TO YOU SON! HOH, HOH, HOH--!

GEE, THANK YOU, SANTA! THANKS!

AND THERE IS A SPECTACULAR MAGIC A-BORN THIS DAY CHRISTMAS HAVING BRIGHTLY HELD A LOT BY THE CRISP, CLEAR BREEZE, DANCING WITH THE FALLING SNOW!

...FILLING YOUNG HEARTS... AND EYES... AND HANDS... PLUMS TO THE BRIM WITH A WONDERFUL SORT OF WARMNESS...

BECAUSE THE CHILDREN... WELL, THEY ARE THE TRUE MAGIC OF CHRISTMAS, AFTER ALL...

MERRY CHRISTMAS, KIDS--!

MERRY CHRISTMAS, ONE AND ALL!

WHEEE--! OH BOY!

AND LOUIS SAY? HE SURE DNDN'T LOOK MUCH LIKE SANTA CLAUS... NOT AT FIRST GLANCE... BUT WHO CAN SAY? WHO CAN EVER, TRULY SAY--?

WHEEE--!

CHRISTMAS SHORE CAN BE HARD WORK... AN A MAN CAN GET OLD AND WRINKLED AND SPENT PART NEAR AFORE HE KNOWS IT'LL DESTREST HERE A BIT--ME BE JEST CLOSE MUH EYES, JESTER A MINUTE! IT SHORE IS C-COLD...!



...COLPERIN EVEN THAN THAT DAY, SO VERY, VERY LONG AGO, IT JEST TURNED TEW THAT YEAR, THAT GLORIOUS YEAR, THAT VERY SPECIAL CHRISTMAS...

THE GREATEST CHRISTMAS OF ALL

MOMMA HAD BEEN SICK, THAT DAY. SHE'D BEEN SICK QUITE A WHILE, IN FACT. WEAK AN' SICK AN' ALWAYS COUGHIN'...

JAY, IT HOULD BE MANY YEARS SINCE HER DEATH, BEFORE I EVER FOUL OUT JEST HAWF TIME THAT TWO KILLED HER. ASTHMA. FIRST IT STOLE HER BREATH AN' EVENTUALLY STOLE HER LIFE.

BUT THAT MORNING IT JEST LEFT HER COAL AND SAWDUST SOUP THAT I EARLY CLIMBED SLEEPLY INTO MY OLD, TATTERED CLOTHES, GRABBED THE PINTED COAL BRICKET FROM IN FRONT OF THE FIREPLACE AND HURRIED OUT BACK TO THE COAL SHED.

"IT WUZ CHRISTMAS, I KEPT TELLIN' MUSSELF OVER AN OVER AGAIN. CHRISTMAS, BUT THE XMASNIGHT DNDN'T WARRIN' ME NONE, CUZ I JEST KEPT THINNIN' OF MOMMA."

"...YES, IT WUZ CHRISTMAS... AN I WUZ TEW... AN' MOMMA WUZ A'DIN'... THAT YEAR THAT I FIRST SAW HIM."



O-O-OH, MY!

"...DROWN ALONG UP THERE IN THE WINDSWEPT,
BLOWN FILLED, CHRISTMAS NORMIN SKY... JEST
A BOUNCE ALONE SNAK 'WEEN THE BEATS OF
MUN HEART... ALWAYS AKEEPIN JUST A HALF STEP
AHEAD OF CHRISTMAS...!"



"...AN I COULD A SHORE I HEARD THE OLD
GUY JEST A SNORIN AWAY TO BEAT THE
BLAND...!"

"...FER HIS SACK, HIS OLD, BATTERED, MYSTICAL
SACK, ADRIFTIN' RIGHT TO JEST AND JEST AS
EASILY AS COULD BE...!"



"WELL, I JEST STOOD THAR FER A WHILE, NOT
KNOWIN WHAT TO DO, I LOOKED AROUND AN
SMALLERED HARD..."



"...THE WORLD WIZ REAL QUIET THEN... BEIN
RIGHT FOR DAWN AN ALL... AN I WANTED TO
HOLLER TO THE OLD FELLER TO COME BACK, BUT
MUN THROAT WIZ SUDDENLY DRY AS A SUMMER'S
DROUGHT AN MUN MOUTH WOULDN'T WORK JEST
RIGHT..."

"...WELL, RIGHT ABOUT THEN I MUSTA BLINKED OR
SOMETHIN'... BUT ALL OF A SUDDEN HE WIZ GONE...
LOST BEHIND THE WRINKL OF AN EYE..."



"NOW I RECKON I OUGHT TO
"SPLAWN RIGHT NOW THET WE
"WUZ RIGHT POOR BACK THEN,
"BONE, RAGGED POOR..."

"IY LIKE I SAID, MAMMA WUZ
"POWERFUL SICK AN' POPPA...
"WELL, POPPA WUZ SICK TOO,
"ONLY MY SICKNESS WOULD COME
"IN GREAT LONG GULPS FROM
"EMBER COLORED BOTTLES THAT
"MADE MY SMELL BAD AN' HE
"WOULD STAY GONE MOST OF THE
"TIME..."



"BUT MARY AN' LINDA COULD HUH
"LITTLE SISTERS...WHY, THEY
"WEREN'T AS GROWED UP" AS ME,
"THEY WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND..."

"I HAD MANAGED TO SAVE A LITTLE
"DAD OF MONEY BY SHOVELLIN'
"SNOW AN' RUNNIN' ERRAWDARS FOR
"OLD WIDDER KRANTZ WHO LIVED
"DOWN THE STREET, BUT IT WUENT
"MUCH...NOT BY A LONG SHOT..."



"SO'S THET SORT OF MADE ME THE
"MAN OF THE FAMILY, THEN
"MAMMA HAD TOLD ME 80 WEEKS
"BEFORE, BETWEEN FITS
"CRAVIN', AN' SHE TOLD ME THET
"THAR WOULDN'T BE A CHRISTMAS
"FER US...LEAST WAYS NOT THET
"YEAR..."

"IN-WE JASHP'...WELL
"HAVE A CHRISTMAS, MAMMA!
"ME...THAT!...WELL...!"



"I BOUGHT THEM EACH A
"LITTLE GIFT, BUT IT WOULDN'T
"BE A VERY MERRY CHRIST-
"MAS FER US..."

"...I JEST WISH THAR
"WUZ A TREE TO PUT THEM
"UNDER! A TREE ALL
"BRIGHT WITH TWINSL
"AN' LIGHTS WITH A BIG
"SHINY STAR RIGHT
"ON TOP...!"



"MEBBE NEXT YEAR, SHE HAD
"SAID, NEXT YEAR SHE WOULD BE
"BETTER...WOULD BE ABLE TO
"FIND A JOB SOMEWHERE, THEN
"SHE HAD BEGIN TO CRY..."

"AN' WELL, I HADN'T MOVED SO
"MUCH...NOT FOR ME, I WUZ THE
"MAN OF THE FAMILY THEN, LIKE
"I SAID, AN' I KNEWED THET I
"HAD TO BE TOUGH..."



"...OR SO I HAD THOUGHT UNTIL
"I SED THET OLD, RED BACK COME
"TUMBLIN' DOWN TO ME WITH A
"THUNK AN' A CLATTER..."



I HURLED BACK TO THE LIVIN' ROOM AN'
THAR IT WUZ... LOADED DOWN WITH
BALLS OF RED AN' BLUE AN' GREEN AN'
JEST ABOUT EVERY COLOR THAT EVER WUZ
EXACTLY LIKE I WANTED IT AN' THE SWEET,
SWEET SMELL OF PINE FILLED OUR HOUSE."



"THEY WUZ SOME TREE... AN' THEY WUZ SOME
CHRISTMAS, TOO. I RAN UPSTAIRS AN' PLIS AWAY AN'
LINDA LOU AN' MOMMA... SPECIALLY MOMMA... DOWN
ALL BLEARY EYED AS THEY WIPED THE SLEEP QUICKLY
AWAY WHEN THEY ALL STREAMED INTO THE LIVIN' ROOM
AN' SEED WHUT WUZ TAKER AN' THEIR MOUTHS FELL WIDE
OPEN. I WUZ JUST AS PROUD AS I COULD BE."



"AN' I RAN TO MUH SACK... THET
GREAT, RED, MAGICAL SACK THET
NEVER EVER RAN OUT OF MIRACLES
AN' PULLED OUT THE BIGGEST AN'
BEST PRESENT OF ALL."

"HERE, MOMMA--!
THIS IS FOR
YOU!"

"FOLPER ME? BUT
LOUIS, HOW--?"

"DON'T WORRY NOW
BOUT THET, MOMMA.
JEST OPEN YER
PACKAGE!"

"AN' HANDED IT TO
MOMMA..."

"W-WH-Y, COFF,
IT'S IT'S BEAUTIFUL...
JEST... SOB... BEAU-
TIFUL--?"

"... MEMBER THET SHE
WUZ A LAUGHIN' AN'
AVERIN' AT THE SAME
TIME... AN' IT WUZ THE
FIRST TIME IN A LONG
WHILE THET SHE HAD
LAUGHED LIKE THET.
IT MADE ME FEEL REAL
WARM ALL OVER."

"AN' ALWAYS THAR WUZ MORE,
MORE 'N HED EVER HAD BEFORE
ENUFF TO LAST US A DOZEN
CHRISTMAS MORNIN'S."



"AN' RIGHT, BUT THEN MOMMA
MENTIONED FOR OLD WIDDER KRANTS,
ALL ALONE THET CHRISTMAS... AS
SHE WUZ EVER' CHRISTMAS."

"MAMMA WU LIKE THE T,
SHE NEVER HAD MUCH, BUT
SHE NEVER COMPLAINED,
LEAST WAYS NOT THET I CAN
REMEMBER...AN SHE WUZ
ALWAYS A WORRIAN' BOUT
OTHERS...SPECIALLY
THEM'S WHAT HAD
EVEN LESS'N
HER..."

SHUCK'S - 17
I PLUMB
AERGOT ALL
'BOUT MER!

"A LOT OF THET JEST
GORTA ANNIBLED OFFIN ON
ME, I GUESS."

CAN WE TAKE
THIS TO HER, MAMMA?
CAN WE?

WE'VE GOT
PLENTY,
ANTHONY!

"MOMMA JUST SHOOK HER HEAD 'YES'
AN SMILED AT ME LIKE MEBBE SHE'D
JUST SEED ME FOR THE FIRST TIME OR
SOMETHIN' AN WE ALL GOT BUMLED
UP REAL WARM...EVEN MOMMA...AN'
OPPPW WE WENT!"

HURRY.

"I FELT REAL GOOD,
BETTER N I'D EVER
FELT BEFORE...CUZ
I FIGGERED THAT
THAT HUZ WHAT
CHRISTMAS WUZ
ALL ABOUT.
SHARIN'...!"

"I SHORE AINT AGGREVATED IT AOME. NEITHER."

"I HUGGED MYSELF ALL SNUG INSIDE
MY NEW COAT AND SCRUCHED MY
TOES DEEP IN MY NEW, SQUEAKY SHOES AND
WONDERED FOR A WHILE WHY I HADN'T
GOTTEN ANY TOYS...THEN I REMEMBERED
I WAS A MAN, AND I HAD GOTTEN A
MAN'S GATES..."

"—AN' HOW I COUNT IT AN' ALL—"

"MAN I DON'T EIGHTLY KNOW IF IN SHE REALLY
BELIEVED ME OR NOT, BUT SHE NEVER ASKED ME
'BOUT IT AS 'W...!'"

HERE, MRS. KRANTZ!
THIS IS FOR YOU, AN'
MERRY CHRISTMAS!

WHY--WHY
THINK NOW, SO
F-OR ME?

THANK YOU! THANK
YOU ALL! AND MERRY
CHRISTMAS TO YOU, TOO.

"I LAUGHED OUT LOUD, THEN, AS WE WENT A MILE DOWN THE ROAD, IT WAS A DEEP, INFECTIOUS LAUGH THAT JUST SOMEHOW SORTA CAME NATURALLY TO MY LIPS. IT GOES WITH THE JIGGLE, I RECKON--!"

"Y-HEP! THET
WUZ SOME DAY,
ALL RIGHT!"

"FUNNY, I AINT COLD
NO MORE... I JEST
RIGHT SLEEPY...
HEBBE I'N I JEST
SHUT MY EYES, FOR
A SECOND..."



"MOMMA HAD GIVEN EVERYTHING
THET SHE HAD BEEN ABLE OF GIVIN'...
EVEN HER LIFE!"

"I REMEMBER HOW SHE JEST SMILED
AT ME THET ONE, FINAL TIME..."

"...M-MOMMA...
M-MOMMA...
M-MOMMA...
'S-OUL---?"



"A'RORE THET DAY WUZ OVER
I RECKON WE MUST A WALKED
FURT NEAR ALL OVER TOWN."



"AN AT EVER! STOP... AT EVER!
HOMME ALONG THE WAY... I'D
REACH WAY DOWN DEEP IN THET
DINGY RED SACK OF MINE AN'
FILL OUT SOMETHIN' FOR EVERYONE!"

"WE HAD ALL A 'LAUGHIN'
AN' JOININ' AN HAVIN' THE
TIME OF OUR LIVES WHEN
SUDDENLY MOMMA'S BREATH
SORTA HUMPLED WAY DOWN IN
HER THROAT AN' HER FACE
TURNED WINTER THAN EVEN
THE FALLOF SNOW!"



"I CRIED... AN I PRAYED
...AN I WISHED... AN
FINALLY, IN THE END, I
JEST CRIED SOME MORE..."

"ONE LAST GIFT... THET WUZ
ALL I REALLY WANTED
JEST MUN MOMMA BACK
TO LAUGH WITH ME AN'
HUG ME

"PLEASE...
OK, PLEASE.
PLEASE, PLEASE.
PLEASE—ENDIVE!"



"BUT THE MAGIC JEST DON'T WORK
THET WAY. I GUESS THET'S
MAGIC OF A DIFFERENT SORT..."

"...AN SO WIDDER KRAINTZ AN'
THE OWNERS EVENTUALLY CAME
WALKIN' REAL SLOW, AN' COVERED
MUN MOMMA WITH A CLEAN
SHEET THET WERENT NEAR AS
WHITE AS COLD AS SHE WUZ
THEN!"



IT WIZ A COUPLE
AN' MORNIN' WHE
WEE HER US AN'
IT SHEDD'D TO ME
THAT THE MIND WIZ
A BROWN' SHARPER
THAN BUCKLEER THAN
THAT BROWN'.

IN-MUTRE WE
A SHOW' TO DO,
LOU'S NOW THET
MORNIN'S...
MORNIN'S... ZHONEY'

MRS KRANTZ SAID
WE'S COULD STAY
WITH HER... SAID SHE
HAD LOTS OF ROOM

X-KRANTZ. WIDDER
KRANTZ... SHE'S DEAD
NOW... LONG DEAD. JEST
LIKE MORNIN' AN'
M-MARY AN' LINDA COU...

JAN I SHORE DO-MINIS
THEM... I SHORE DO
B-BUT I DON'T MISS
POPPA...

...CAUSE WE SEDD' WIT
WE DID... AN' IT PERT
BAR BROKE THREE TINY
HEARTS WHO ALREADY
HELP WORN ENUFF.
HURT IT...

D-OUR TREE... SOB'...
OR LOVELY TREE!

HE WIZ AN EWN' MAN, MUSH
POPPA. COURSHTIN' WEREN'T
ALL HIS FAULT. 'CAUSE I
FINGER' THET MOST OF HIS
BITTERNESS JEST SORTA
SPILLED INTA HIM, RIGH
ALONG WITH THE CHEAP, BAD
SWELLIN' WINE...!"

...AN' MORN'S YER MORNIN'
OUT SPENDIN', WIC'... MORE
OF MUN HARD EARNED MONEY
ON... WIC'. FOOLISHNESS LIKE
THET DANNY TREE?

...AN HE COULDN'T
KEEP IT LOCKED UP
INSIDE HIM FOR LONG.
IT JEST SORTA BRIESED
BACK UP, GOSH! HUM
BULLY OVER EVER'
THING."

DEAD... HAHAHA
SERVES... WIC'...
SERVES HER
RIGHT! HAHAHA
... 'SCUMP'...!

...AN HE LAUGHED AN LAUGHED SO HARD THET I THOUGHT
HE WEREN'T EVER AGON' TO QUIT. FINALLY I COULD' SEND
NO MORE... IT JEST KEPT TAINKIN' BOUT MORNIN'... PORE
MORNIN'... AN' 'BOUT OUR TREE... AN I HIT HIM JEST AS
HARD AS I COULD', THEN HIS FACE CLOUDED OVER AN' HE
SLAPPED ME SO HARD THET IT KNOCKED ME DOWN."

"WHEN... WHEN
I TOLE HIM
BOUT MORNIN'
HE JEST
THREN BACK HIS
DIFTY HEAD AN'
LAUGHIN'..."

WHY YOU... WIC'...
UNGRATEFUL
LITTLE--!

HEY! WHAT'S TWIST
YOU'RE... WIC'
CARRYIN' ROUND?

OWWW!

"AN I DROPPED MUN SACK...
MUN MAGICAL SACK WHUT HAD
BEEN EMPTY EVER SINCE MORNIN'
HAD SPED THAR IN THE SOFT,
SWIRLING SNOW WITH HER HEAD
NESTLED ALL SAFE IN MUN ARMS."

"HEBBE... WIC'...
I COULD' PAWWW...
HEY! THAR'S
SOMETHIN' IN
HERE... WIC'...!"

S-SANTA...? YOU
OK, SANTA...?

EH...? S-SOME-
ONE...THAR...?

...AN' MORNIN'...? THET
YOU, MORNIN' P'SHORE BEEN
A LONG TIME... AINT
17, MORNIN'?

"SHORE BEEN A MIGHTY LONG TIME SINCE THET CHRISTMAS DAY WHEN FOGGIE CRAMMED HIS HAND DOWN HIS MUTHA MUL OLD SACK... REACHIN WAY DOWN FURTHER THAN I COULD EVER REACH... IN THET WUZ WHEN HE STARTED SCREAMIN..."

ANNOOO --

"CHORE --"



"...AN JERKED HIS HANDS OUTA THAR QUICK AS LIGHTNIN'... BUT NOT NEARLY QUICK ENUFF IT WUZ THE BIGGEST SNAKE I'D EVER SEED, MAMMA. A RATTLE-SNAKE... AN IT DIDNT LET GO FER A LONG, LONG TIME."



"WIDDER KRANTZ TOOK REAL GOOD CARE OF US, MAMMA, AFTER THET... AN I KEPT MUTHA OLD SACK, TOO."

"I-IT'S BEEN A GOOD LIFE, MAMMA... ESPECIALLY ON CHRISTMAS. WTH I AINT NEVER HADDA USE NONE OF THE MAGIC FER MUSLFL, I'M UNDERSTAND, JEST FER THE OTHERS, I-I'VE GOT SO MANY FRIENDS... I... MISS... YOU-- MOM --!"



"DEAD...?"

"NO SHERIFF, HE AINT DEAD. SHURE, HE'S USED TO A LOT COLDER PLACE THAN THIS. HE'S JUST RESTIN' IS ALL. I BET HE GETS PRETTY TIRED. WHY, SURE, LOOK HERE! A PRESENT..."



"...AN IT'S APPRESSED..."

"...CHORIN', WE GOT A LOT OF WORK TO DO. IT'S CHRISTMAS, YOU KNOW!"



"HE SHURE DONT LOOK MUCH LIKE SANTA CLAUS... NOT AT FIRST GLANCE... BUT WHO CAN SAY? WHO CAN EVER TRULY, SAY...?"

Mother knows best

"MY CONCERN HAS ALWAYS BEEN FOR THE CHILDREN... THEY OCCUPY MY EVERY WAKING THOUGHT, THEY ARE THE **MOTIVE** BEHIND MY MINISTRATIONS, AND THE **FOUNTAIN** OF MY EXISTENCE. I WAS PROGRAMMED TO INSTRUCT THEM, GUIDE THEM, **PROTECT** THEM—AND I WILL DO SO, UNFAILINGLY, AT ANY COST. WHATEVER THE THREAT TO MY PERSONAL SAFETY. THE CHILDREN ARE THE **SEEDS** OF THE FUTURE, THE **BUILDERS** OF TOMORROW. THEY, ABOVE ALL, MUST BE SHIELDED AGAINST **ADVERSITY**..."

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DC Comics



DO YOU
KNOW WHAT I
WISHED FOR,
MOTHER? I
WISHED FOR
A KEY TO THE
BLUE DOOR.

I KNOW,
JAMES. GO TO
SLEEP NOW,
IT'S LATE AND
SANTA WILL BE
HERE SOON!

DO YOU
THINK SANTA
HAS A KEY
TO THE BLUE
DOOR?

I'M
SURE
HE DOES...
HUSH
NOW...

GOODNIGHT,
CHILDREN.

"THEY WILL BE AWAKE AGAIN SOON...
MUST FINISH MAKING THEIR GIFTS
THANK HEAVEN THE MACHINE ROOM
IS STILL FUNCTIONING... HOW MANY
CHRISTMASSES IS IT NOW—SEVEN,
EIGHT? I COULD CHECK MY MEMORY
BOOKS, BUT IT'S NOT IMPORTANT.
WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS THAT THEY
HAVE CHRISTMAS."

... VALERIE WANTS A DOLL
HOUSE AND A PAINT BOX...
JAMES WANTS A TRAIN SET
AND...



CLIP.
CLOP CLIP.CLOP



VALERIE,
COME ON!
THAT'S HIM!
THAT'S SANTA
CLAUS! HEAR
THE REINDEER?
HE'S HERE!

LOOK,
CHILDREN,
SANTA CLAUS
HAS COME

SANTA!
SANTA!
YOU'RE
HERE!

HI,
SANTA!
DO YOU
BRING MY
DOLL
HOUSE?

WHAT
DO YOU
SAY,
SANTA?

HUH?...OH, YEAH YEAH!
I BRUNG YER DOLL
HOUSE...AND A BIKE
FOR YOU JAMES!

OH!
YOUR HAND
IS COLD,
SANTA! IS
IT ALWAYS
COLD AT
THE NORTH
POLE?

POLE?...YEAH,
ALWAYS COLD
UP THERE. THAT'S
WHY OL' SANTA
WEARS HIS SNOW
SUIT AND HIS
BOOTS!

OH,
SANTA!
IS THIS MY
DOLL HOUSE?
IT'S SO BIG!
OH, I CAN'T
WAIT!

CAREFULLY,
VALERIE. LET
MOTHER HELP
YOU



"I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I WAS OUT WHEN I WOKE UP. IT WAS TO THE SOUNDS OF THE MOST BLOOD-CURLING SCREAMS I'VE EVER HEARD IN MY LIFETIME..."

EEEEEEEEEE

"IT WAS THE SERVICE ROBOTS... THEY'D GONE BERGERK! WE DIDN'T FIND OUT 'TILL LATER THAT THE IMPACT OF WHATEVER HAD HIT US HAD DESTROYED THE MAIN COMPUTER BANK THAT CONTROLLED THEM. JESUS! — THEY WERE LIKE A PACK OF RABID WOLVES!"



"WE FOUGHT BACK THE BEST WE COULD BUT THEY HAD THE ADVANTAGE — ALL THE WEAPONS AND SHIPS CONTROLS WERE UP FRONT IN THE BRIDGE BEYOND THE HULLBAY. WE COULDNT EVEN SEE OUT TO TELL WHERE WE WAS HEADING FOR A TIME THERE, THEY ALMOST WIPE US OUT!"



"FOR THREE YEARS WE WERE HUNTED LIKE ANIMALS — HIDING LIKE RATS FROM THAT ARMY OF METAL HORRORS WHILE THE SHIP SPUN USELESSLY THROUGH SPACE. EIGHT YEARS OFF COURSE, I BECAME A NOMAD, STEALING WHAT FOOD I COULD FIND, HOARDING IT TO MYSELF!"



"GRADUALLY I WORKED MY WAY FORWARD TO THE KITCHEN AND AT LAST HAD SUSTAINABLE FOOD. BY NOW THE ROBOTS HAD DESTROYED ALL OR MOST OF THE OTHERS. THEN, ONE NIGHT, IN DESPAIR, I MADE A RAID ON THE ROBOT COMPUTER BANK AND SHORTCIRCUITED THE DAMAGED CONSOLE..."



"THAT DID IT. ALL OVER THE SHIP ROBOTS WOUND DOWN AND STOPPED ROLLING. I HAD WON! I WAS FREE! ALONE, BUT FREE! I STARTED FOR THE MAIN CONTROLS ON THE BRIDGE SO I COULD TURN THE SHIP AROUND... HEAD BACK TO EARTH. BUT I HAD TO PASS THROUGH HERE FIRST..."



"I NEVER EVEN SAW HER COMING!"



I THOUGHT FOR SURE I WAS A GONER, BUT SHE SEEMED DIFFERENT FROM THE REST OF THEM. SHE DID AN ODD THING... INSTEAD OF KILLING ME SHE TOOK ME TO THE CRYONIC DECK AND PUT ME IN SUSPENDED ANIMATION!



"WHEN I NEXT OPENED MY EYES, THE FREEZER LID WAS BACK AND SHE WAS STANDING THERE WITH THE SANTA CLAUS SUIT..."



FOR THE PAST EIGHT YEARS NOW SHE UNFREEZES ME EVERY CHRISTMAS LIKE A SIDE OF BEEF TO PLAY SANTA TO YOU KIDS. I'VE BEEN GOING OUT OF MY MIND WAITING FOR YOU TO GROW OLD ENOUGH TO HELP ME...

BUT MOTHER WOULDN'T HURT ANYBODY. SHE PROTECTS US!



PROTECTS YOU? HA! WHY DO YOU THINK SHE NEVER LET YOU SEE BEYOND THE BLUE DOOR? 'CAUSE IT'S A MORGUE OUT THERE, THAT'S WHY!

LISTEN... YOU GOTTA GET TO THE BRIDGE! THERE'S A HEAT PISTOL THERE ON THE WALL OVER THE CAPTAIN'S CHAIR - I SEEN IT ONCE!



"WHAT ARE YOU AND JAMES DISCUSSING, SANTA?"



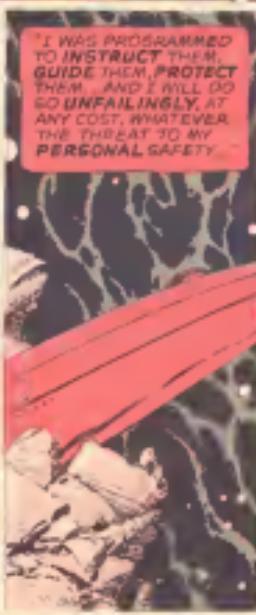
"...UH... NOTHIN' JUST WISHIN' THE LITTLE FELLA A MERRY CHRISTMAS... HEEHEH!"

"SANTA HAS TO LEAVE NOW, CHILDREN. SAY GOOD-BYE TO HIM, SAY GOOD-BYE TO THE CHILDREN, SANTA."



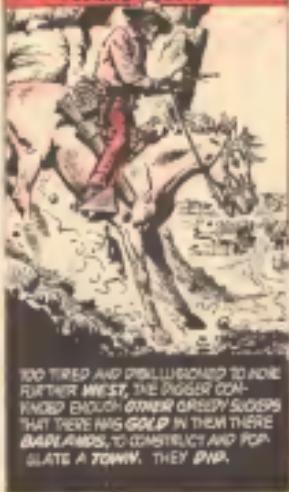
"YEAH... S'LONG, KIDS. SEE YA NEXT YEAR!"





PROLOGUE

ARIZONA, 1883. NOT MUCH CHANGED. IN THE THREE YEARS JESS CADE WAS AWAY, BLOODSTONE HAD STILL A POOR DESERT TOWN; A LIVING Memento TO SOME CRAZY-CUB PROSPECTORS WHO LIVED.



TOO TIRED AND DISILLUSIONED TO MOVE FURTHER WEST, THE ENDURER COULD FIND ENOUGH OXYGEN CREEPY SUGAR THAT THERE WAS GOLD IN THEM THERE DAWLAMOS, TO CONSTRUCT AND POPULATE A TOWNSHIP. THEY DIED.

PORLUCKED, BLOODSTONE LAY ALONG THE CATTLE TRAIL FROM TEXAS TO CALIFORNIA. THE TOWN SURVIVED, BUT NEVER PROSPERED, BY LIVING OFF PASSING COWBOYS.



WHEN JESS CADE ARRIVED THERE THE FIRST TIME IT HAD A POPULATION OF ABOUT ONE HUNDRED. MOSTLY EXHIBITATE EASTERS, LUCKLESS PROSPECTORS WHO SETTLED TO SHARE THEIR MISERIES.

JESS WAS DIFFERENT. HE DISLIKED BLOODSTONE AN OUTLAW. A WILD, RECKLESS TEENAGER WHO SACRIFICE RUSTLERS FROM TEXAS RANCHES ON TIL THEY CALLED, A "REGULATOR" ... A KID KILLER, TO FIND A STOP SIGN.



HS LIFE NOT WORTH A BULLET, JESS LEFT TEXAS AND STUMBLED UPON BLOODSTONE, A REAUNCH OF A TOWN BUT ONE IN WHICH HE'D BE RELATIVELY SAFE. SO THAT'S WHERE HE MADE HIS BUNK.



HE MIGHT HAVE REMAINED THERE INDEFINITELY. WERE NOT FOR THAT NIGHT IN DECEMBER, THREE YEARS AGO, ALMOST TO THE DAY, HE CLOSED HIS EYES, AND LET HIS THOUGHTS DRIFT BACK.



BLOODSTONE CHRISTMAS

BACK TO A TIME WHEN CAMPFIRE GLOWED LIKE A CHRISTMAS STAR AGAINST THE NIGHT SKY, AND THE GIRLS WAS PARCHED RAWHIDE, BUT IT DIDN'T MATTER, BECAUSE JESS HAD IDEAS.

YOU'RE PLUMB ~~LOCO~~, CARE, ROB THE BLOODSTONE BANK ON CHRISTMAS EVE...THE LORD'S BIRTHDAY? SUCH BLASPHEMY WOULD TRULY BRING THE INRATH OF GOD UPON US!

DON'T START GETTIN' HOLIER THAN THOU ON ME. YOU'RE HANDED BY THE LAW, SAME AS I AM. CHRISTMAS EVE IS NO DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER NIGHT, EXCEPT THEY WON'T BE EXPECTIN' TROUBLE.

AND, CARE GARCIA IS ~~RIGHT~~...A MISSION OF SACRIFICE ON SUCH A HOLY NIGHT WOULD BE POORLY TO PARAPHRASE. THE LORD WOULDN'T PERMIT SUCH EVIL TO OCCUR ON HIS DAY!



WELL, I INTEND TO BLOW THAT BANK COME DECEMBER 24TH. IF YOU HOMIES AINT WITH ME, IT MEANS YOU'RE DANGEROUS WITNESSES...AND I ALWAYS COVER UP MY TRACKS!

DON'T THREATEN US CARE. YOU SHOOT OFF YOUR MOUTH TOO OFTEN AND WE'LL SHOOT IT OFF FOR YOU!

ALL RIGHT, HAVE IT YOUR WAY. I WON'T MIND A ~~BUT~~ SPRININ' THE HALF MILLION DOLLAR BY ~~MY~~ SELF.

HALF MILLION DOLLARS? WHAT'RE YOU TALKIN' ABOUT? BLOODSTONE'S A POOR TOWN. IF THERE'S TEN GRAND IN THAT BANK, WE'D BE LUCKY!

TRUE, BUT BERT CARPENTER'S BOY'S JUST DELIVERED A HUDE HERD OF PRIME STOCK TO TONCOM. THEY'RE ON THEIR WAY BACK TO SAN ANSELLO.

WORD IS THEY'RE STOPPIN' OVER IN BLOODSTONE TO WHOOP IT UP FOR THE HOLIDAYS...AND PUTTIN' ALL THAT MONEY FROM THE CATTLE SALE IN BLOODSTONE'S VAKELT FOR SAFEKEEPING, MEAN-TIME.



DECEMBER
23RD, 1877.

WHAT'S THE MATTER, SHERIFF?
CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAYS EARLY...
WITH ANOTHER BINGE? WHAT
KIND LAW WE GOT HERE WHEN
THE SHERIFF'S SO PRUNK HE
COULDN'T SHOOT A DEAD BODY
IF 'N HE WAS ON TOP OF IT?



MORGAN TUCKER HAD BEEN SHERIFF OF BLOODSTONE EVER SINCE IT WAS FOUNDED. IT HAD BEEN AN EASY JOB, A SATURDAY NIGHT BRAWL HERE, A LADY SHOPLIFTING THERE. NOTHINGS TOO REWARDING LIKE MOST POLICE IN BLOODSTONE. TUCKER NEVER MADE AN ISSUE OF THE LAW. AS LONG AS THINGS WERE QUIET AND PEACEFUL, HE SAW NO REASON TO DISTURB THEM.



MORGAN STAGGERED UNSTEADILY UP THE STAIRCASE TO SARAH KIERNAN'S APARTMENT. DAMNED IF SHE WASN'T THE ONLY THING IN HIS LIFE, BESESIDES DRINKING, THAT MADE IT WORTH GETTING UP MORNING.

THEY WERE THE ONLY TWO THINGS THAT HELD ANY SYMPATHY FOR HIM.



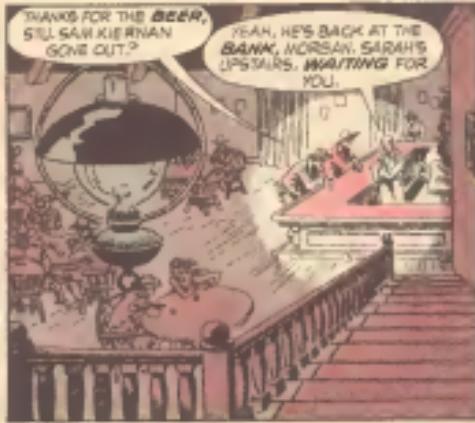
DAMMIT, CAPE! I KNOW YOU GOT A FAWN
AFTER YOUR SKIN FROM THE BARBARY
COAST ALL THE WAY TO MISSOURI. I'VE
LEFT YOU ALONE SO FAR CAUSE I'M TOO
OL'D AND TIRED TO GIVE A GOOD GOD-
DAVIN...

BUT DON'T
PUSH IT,
Y'HEAR?



THANKS FOR THE BEER,
STU. SAN KIERNAN
GONE OUT?

YEAH, HE'S BACK AT THE
BANK. MORGAN. SARAH'S
UPSTAIRS. WAITING FOR
YOU.



SOMETHING'S
BOTHERING
MORGAN.
WHAT IS
IT?

IT'S JESS CAPE. I KNOW THAT YOUNG
SON OF A PRAIRIE PIG IS GONNA GIVE ME
TROUBLE - SOON. I SHOULDA THROWN
HIM IN A CELL WHEN HE FIRST RODE INTO
TOWN, BUT I KNEW I WASN'T FAST AS I
USED TO BE.



WHENEVER I COME NEAR, I SEE HIS MIND EASIN' TOWARD HIS LEATHER, LIKE HE'S PAUTIN' FOR ME TO CHALLENGE HIM. I KNOW IF I TRIED TO TAKE HIM NOW, HE'D HAVE ME EATIN' LEAD BEFORE I COULD TWITCH MY FINGER!

PLAIN TRUTH IS SARAH, HE SCARES ME

CARE'S A WILD ONE, BUT HE AINT DONE NOBODY ANY HARM YET. YOU GOT NO CAUSE TO GO AFTER HIM

SARAH, I WANT TO GET OUT OF THIS TOWN, GIVE UP THIS FOOL JOB, AND START A NEW LIFE SOMEWHERE... AWAY FROM BLOODYSTONE. SAY YOU'LL COME WITH ME!



YOU KNOW I CAN'T DO THAT I'M SAM'S WIFE, MORGAN. C'DY, SAM'S A BUSY MAN, RUNNIN' THAT BANK AND ALL. HE DON'T PAY ME AS MUCH ATTENTION AS I'D LIKE, SO I SPEND MY AFTERNOONS WITH SOMEONE WHO'S MORE... AFFECTIONATE.

BUT SAM'S A GOOD MAN. I LOVE HIM, AND HE NEEDS ME! NOBODY IN THIS WORLD COULD MAKE ME RUN OUT ON SAM NOT EVEN YOU!

MEANWHILE, JESS CARE SMILED TO HIMSELF AS THE BAND OF TRAIL COWBOYS ROPE INTO TOWN, CARRYING HIS CHRISTMAS PRESENT. GREENER THAN ANY CHRISTMAS TREE WE'D EVER SEEN.

THEM'S BERT CARPENTER'S BOYS, ALL RIGHT. BY TOMORROW NIGHT, THERE'LL BE TWO DEAD MEXICANS ON MY CONSCIENCE AND HALF A MILLION DOLLARS IN MY SADDLEBAG.



JESS CARE, WHERE ON EARTH YOU BEEN? FOR SAYIN' WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE MARRIED SOON, I HARDLY EVER SEE YOU ANY MORE! YOU COMIN' OVER TO MY MA'S PLACE TOMORROW NIGHT, LIKE YOU PROMISED?

CORAL LISTEN TO ME, AND LISTEN GOOD, FEARER...?

SOMETHIN' BIG'S GONNA HAPPEN TOMORROW NIGHT! I'M GONNA HAVE TO LEAVE TOWN FOR A WHILE... MAYBE A LONG WHILE... BUT I'LL BE BACK FOR YOU AS SOON AS IT'S SAFE. I SWEAR IT, CORALIE... I LOVE YOU. TRUST ME!



DECEMBER 24TH, 1878.

MERRY CHRISTMAS, SAM PARLINS... AND NO MATTER WHAT ELSE YOU MAY HEAR, I MEAN THAT SINCERELY.

I KNOW YOU DO, SARAH MY LOVE. OH DEAR, I BOUGHT A SPECIAL PRESENT FOR YOU THIS AFTERNOON, BUT I LEFT IT IN MY OFFICE... AT THE BANK! I'D BETTER RUN DOWN AND GET IT!



SAM KIERWAN WAS A HAPPY MAN. HOW COULD ANYONE NOT BE HAPPY ON CHRISTMAS EVE? OH, HE KNEW ABOUT SARAH'S DAYTIME AFFAIRS. EVERYONE DID. BUT HE ALSO KNEW THAT, THROUGH THEM ALL, HER LOVE FOR HIM HAD NEVER DWINNED.

MERRY CHRISTMAS, SHERIFF. YOU LOOK LIKE YOU'RE HAVING A FINE TIME ALREADY!



WHY NOT? IT'S CHRISTMAS EVE! EVERYBODY'S HOME WITH THEIR FAMILIES AND THEIR PRESENTS ALL I GOT IS A BOTTLE AND A GUN... OH YEAH AND A TIN BADGE.



SAM KIERWAN TRIED LIKE HELL TO FEEL SORRY FOR SHERIFF TUCKER. COULDN'T. SO HE PUT HIS MIND MORE PLEASANT THINGS.

SARAH.



WHAT? WHAT ARE YOU DOING...?



I TOOK CARE OF THE ALARM ANYSELF! HOW THE HELL DIP THAT FOOL KNOW WE WERE HERE?

WHAT DID I TELL YOU CARE? THE LORD WILL NOT HAVE HIS BIRTHDAY CELEBRATED BY EVIL. NOW WE ARE MUSKERS... AND THE WHOLE TOWN WILL HAVE HEARD THE SHOT!



RAVAGED MORNIN' FOLLOWED THE OUTLAWS' ESCAPE. ROUTE WAS COVERED BY SHERIFF MORGAN TUCKER, WHO FOUND COURAGE, IF NOT AIM, IN THE WHISKEY HE'D CONSUMED.

INSTEAD, HE GRABBED A MOUNT AND RODE THROUGH THE DESERT LIKE A SANDSTORM. A MAKESHIFT POSSE ATTEMPTED PURSUIT, BUT LATER RETURNED TO BODDING, CONVINCED OF THE FUTILITY OF IT ALL.

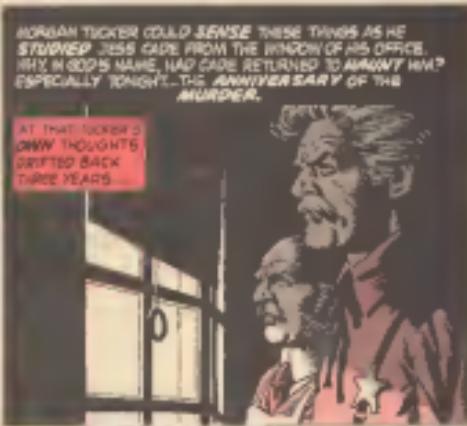


THE TWO MEXICANS DIED THERE IN THE STREET. JESS CAPE DIDN'T.



THE MEMORIES PISOLY. THOSE THINGS ARE THOSE THINGS PASSED. NOW, IT IS A STRONGER, COLDER JESS CAPE WHO RIDES INTO BLOODSTONE... MADE SO BY LONG MONTHS OF DESERT SURVIVAL AND THAT FIRST TASTE OF BLOOD.

MORGAN TUCKER COULD SENSE THESE THINGS AS HE STARED JESS CAPE FROM THE WINDOW OF HIS OFFICE. WHY IN GOD'S NAME HAD CAPE RETURNED TO ANNOUNCE HIM? ESPECIALLY TONIGHT, THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE MURDER.



AND HOW HE'D BROKEN THE NEWS TO SARAH THAT SAM KERMAN HAD BEEN GUNNED DOWN BY JESS CAPE.

LET ME TAKE YOU AWAY FROM ALL THIS, SARAH. TOO MANY MEMORIES FOR YOU HERE.

CHEAP HYPOCRITE! IT WAS YOUR CONSCIENCE THAT KILLED SAM! YOU LET JESS CAPE HAVE FREE REIGN OF THE TOWN BECAUSE YOU WERE SCARED OF HIM!



EVEN AFTER HE'D KILLED SAM, YOU WERE SO DRAWN, YOU COULDN'T HAVE SHOT HIM WITH A CANNON!



IT'S YOUR FAULT SAM'S DEAD. NOW YOU COME AROUND HERE TRYING TO SWEET-TALK ME.

YOU'LL NEVER TOUCH A FINGER TO ME AGAIN, MORGAN... NOT TILL THE DAY YOU BRING ME JESS CAPE'S HEAD.

SHE ASKED THAT PROMISE, TOO, THREE YEARS, AND SARAH KERMAN NEVER ONCE LOOKED AT MORGAN TUCKER WITH ANYTHING BUT CONTEMPT. NOW THE SHERIFF HAD ONLY ONE COMFORT: THE BOTTLE.



OUTSIDE, JESS CARR CALLED OUT TO THE PARSON FOR HIS BAPTISM. WHERE IS SHE, SISTER? WHERE IS CORINA LEE? I BROUGHT ENOUGH TROUBLE TO THIS TOWN THREE YEARS AGO... I GOT NO REASON TO BRING MORE NOW. JUST TELL ME WHERE MY GRANTEE IS.

SHES AT THE CHAPEL, JESS. CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICES.



SHERIFF MORGAN TUCKER HAD NO DOUBT THAT JESS CARR KNEW A RULE WAS POINTED AT HIS BACK. IT WAS LIKE THE OLD DAYS... A DARE...A BLATANT, CONTEMPTUOUS, STOP-ME-IF-YOU-CAN.



TUCKER TRIED TO HOLD THE WEAPON STEADY, BUT HE COULDN'T.

INSIDE, THE CONGREGATION SANG HURDLES TO REMEMBER "SILENT NIGHT, HOLY NIGHT..."

ALL IS PEACE.

ALL IS CALM...



AND THEN THE VOICES WERE STILLED, BUT GONE.

CORINA LEE! I TOLD YOU I'D BE BACK FOR YOU!

JESS!

I...



THE ECHO HUNG IN THE AIR LIKE A VAPOR, THEN BECAME SILENCE. FOR A FULL THREE MINUTES, NO SOUND WAS HEARD IN THE CHAPEL.

IT WAS AS EVERYONE ANTICIPATED. SOME DIVINE RETRIBUTION FOR THIS DESECRATION OF GOD'S HOUSE. WHEN IT WAS OBVIOUS NONE WAS FORTHCOMING, THE PASSOR, HAVING NO BETTER IDEA, BEGAN TO SING.



DOOMED AND TWINKLANT... TUCKER SHRIEKED TO HIMSELF. F. TRIUMPHANT, INDEED, BUT JOYFUL? NO, HE DIDN'T THINK HE WAS.



SARAH KENNAN DIDN'T GO TO CHURCH THAT NIGHT. TRUTH IS, SHE ALREADY WENT OUT, IT WAS SINCE SAW HER BUT ESPECIALLY NOT TONIGHT.



MURDER KNOCKED GENTLE AS A WINTER MORNING.



Many thanks
Sarah - Love
Morgan

SARAH'S TEARS WERE NO LONGER OF GRIEVE, BUT OF HORROR AND SHAME. MORGAN TUCKER TURNED AND WALKED GLEELY BACK DOWNSTAIRS.

THERE REALLY WASN'T A HELL OF A LOT HE, OR ANYONE ELSE, COULD SAY.



IT WAS HAPPENING AGAIN THIS EVENING. SHE HAD JUST LOOKED IN ON PAULO—TURNING THE COVERS AROUND HIS FRAIL, LITTLE BODY AND KISSING HIS CHEEK—AND HAD STEPPED BACK INTO THE DARKENED HALL WHEN SHE HEARD THE NOISE BEHIND HER.

THE MAN LEAPED AT HER OUT OF THE SHADOWS LIKE A CAT, KNOCKING HER DOWN WITH A GASP, STIFLING HER CRIES OF TERROR WITH A ROUGH PALM.

HE HAD KICKED AND SHOUTED AND APPEARED WITH BLAZING EYES BUT HIS FACE WAS GLOM AND SET IN THE GLOOM AND SHE KNEW—AS HE THREW HIS WEIGHT ACROSS HER—that even if she could see his features clearly in the darkness, there would be no compassion in them.

ALL SHE COULD DO WAS TO LET HER BODY TAKE IN ONE LAST BREATH AND WATCH THE GLEAMING ARMS OF THE SCALPING AS IT PLUNGED TOWARD HER HEAVING THROAT.

DENISE LURCHED UPRIGHT IN BED, NIGHT-GOWN STICKING TO HER BACK, BODY SLICK WITH SWEAT. SHE BLINKED AT THE DARK, FAMILIAR BEDROOM THEN REACHED OVER QUICKLY TO TOUCH JASON'S REASSURING SHOULDER. HE WASN'T THERE.



WITH A Scream OF REMEMBRANCE, SHE SUDDED OFF THE MATTRESS AND INTO HER SLIPPERS. JASON WAS OUT ON CALL. SHE SOLEO.



TORNANT OF ALL NIGHTS... SHE MOVED TOWARD THE HALL, SWINGING HER HEAD SLEEPILY.



SEASON'S GRIEVINGS

SHE BRUSHED BACK A LOCA FROM JASON'S FACE AND KISSED HIS FOREHEAD.

TO BE ABLE
TO SLEEP LIKE A
CHILD HOW
WONDERFUL

SHE SMILED AT JASON'S SON, THE SMUDGY CHEEKS AND GENTLY RISING CHEST.

She closed the door to his room and crossed back to her own wearily.



SOMETHING SCRATCHED AGAINST HER LEG. SHE REACHED DOWN AND SCRATCHED TALBOT'S EYES.



A YOUTHFUL CHORUS SWELLED MELONICALLY FROM THE FRONT YARD. CRISP MUS CAROLS! SHE SMILED AND GRABBED JASON'S WINTER JACKET OFF THE HOOK.

WHEN SHE STRAIGHTENED SOMETHING MADE HER OPEN THE TOP DRAWER OF HER BUREAU. HER HAND HESITATED A MOMENT, THEN WITHHELD THE WILLOWED PAPER FROM BEHIND THE SOCKS A WHOLE YEAR AND SHED HUNG ON TO IT. WHY? WOULD SHE EVER THROW IT AWAY?



SHE FOLDED THE PAPER QUICKLY AND TOSSED IT ON THE DRESSER.



SHE STOOD UNTIL HER TOES
NUMBED, THEN STEPPED BACK
HOPE AND WISHED GOODBYE.
SHE SHUT THE DOOR BEHIND
HER AND LOCKED IT SECURELY.
IT WASN'T UNTIL SHE POURLED
THE COFFEE THAT SHE LOOKED
DOWN AT THE FLOOR.



A FIST OF DREAD PUNCHED
AT HER HEART, HER HEAD
SHIVERED, COULD THEY BE
HER TRACKERS? BUT THEY LED
INTO THE DRAWING ROOM—
SHE HADN'T BEEN IN THERE!



SHE SAT DOWN THE COFFEE
AND FOLLOWED CAUTIOUSLY...

HAD SOMEONE SLIPPED IN AND
WIPED HER WHILE SHE WAS WATCHING
THE CHANNELS? HAD JASON
COME HOME? BUT WHY WOULD HE
CREEP IN UNNOTICED?



SHE TWITCHED AS THE LIGHTS
WINKED ON AND OFF SUDDENLY.

POWER FAILURE—THE SHOW
PROBABLY GREATLY JUST WHAT
SHE NEEDED! SHE STUMBBLED
INTO A CHAIR, DROPPING ABOUT
FOR THE COFFEE KITCHEN BURNER,
REACHING INSIDE, SHE FELT
ABOUT FOR THE CAMPFIRE. IN A
MOMENT THE DARKNESS RECEP-
ED ABOUT HER.



THE WATERY TRAIL LED TO THE
STAIRCASE. SHE FOLLOWED,
STARTING TO CALL JASON'S NAME
THEN CATCHING HERSELF (NOT
TOO LATE) WHAT IF HE WAS...
SHE HADN'T LET HERSELF COM-
PLUTE THE THOUGHT.



SHE TRIPPED OVER SOMETHING.



THE SCREAM CONGLOMERATED IN HER THROAT. SHE BIT DOWN HARD ON HER KNUCKLES UNTIL PAIN FLARED AWAY. THE TERROR HER EYES JERKED SLOWLY TO THE STARS.

THE CHILD! HE'LL GET THE CHILD!

SHE BOLTED UP THE FIRST STEPS. SHE WOULD NOT LET HIM HARM A CHILD!

THERE WAS A MOVEMENT BEHIND HER. SHE TURNED ABOUT SLOWLY, EYES SEARCHING THE SHADOWS.

HE STOOD FRAMED IN THE DOORWAY IN HIS PYJAMAS, STARING CALMLY AT HER. HIS PAINTLESS FIST WITH SNOW SOMETHING BLUNTED METALLICALLY IN HIS RIGHT HAND.

A COLD BREEZE RIPLED HER HAIR AS SHE FLUNG OPEN THE DOOR TO PUALO'S ROOM. THE BED WAS EMPTY. THE WINDOW OPEN.

HE'S TAKEN... THE CHILD! BUT WHY?

THE SPANS AT HER BACK AND THIGH, KNOCKING HER DOWN. THERE WAS AN UNEARTHLY STRENGTH IN HIS PROL' ARMS, A DEMONIC LIGHT IN HIS YOUNG EYES.

PUALO!



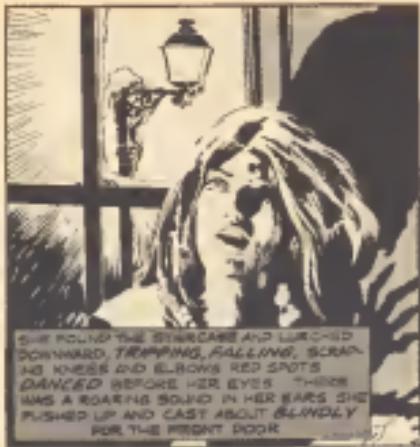
PAIN ROCKETED INTO HER ARM. SHE SCREAMED AGAIN AS THE CANDLE TOOK FREE AND FLASHED UPWARD. THE CANDLE SPIN ACROSS THE FLOOR WINDING OUT. NIGHT DESCENDED ON HER. IN THE AWFUL DARKNESS THE FUN FOUND HER SHOULDER!



She knocked out suddenly. Her foot connecting with something soft and yielding. There was a grunt and his weight left her body. She scrambled to her feet and ran into blackness.

A GASP LUSHED FROM HER AS SHE COLLIDED WITH THE WALL. SHE SLID TO HER KNEES, SLOWING DOWN THE HALL. SHE HEARD THE SOUND OF RUSHING FOOTFALLS.





SHE ROLLED THE STYRACIDE AND LURCHED
DOWNWARD, TRIPPING, FALLING, SCRAP-
ING KNEES AND ELBOWS. RED SPOTS
DANCED BEFORE HER EYES. THERE
WAS A ROARING SOUND IN HER EARS. SHE
PUSHED UP AND CAST ABOUT BRIEFLY
FOR THE FRONT DOOR.



SUDDEN PAIN KNIFED
ACROSS HER LEGS, HER
BUTTOCKS. SHE
SCREAMED. HE FOUND
HER!



SHE THREW HER
HANDS IN FRONT OF
HER AND RECEIVED A
STINNING LACERATION
ACROSS HER PALMS.

PUALO!

SHE SCREAMED HIS
NAME OVER AND OVER.
HE DUN'T HEAR. HE
LURCHED AT HER WITH
THE TERRIBLE GLADE.



SHE SWUNG WILDLY AGAIN
WITH HER TORN ARM, CATCH-
ING HIM A GLANCING BLOW
ON THE HEAD. HE REELED
MOMENT. ONLY SHE GRASPED
AT THE OPPORTUNITY AND
RACED THROUGH THE
KITCHEN DOOR.



SHE NEEDED TIME TO THINK!
THE IDEA FLASHED INSTANTLY
IN HER MIND. SHE KNOCKED THE
CHARIS ASIDE, GOT BEHIND THE
HEAVY OAK LEGS AND PUSHED.



HE CRASHED AS HIS BODY THUMPED
AGAINST THE OUTSIDE DOOR. SHE LEANED
AGAINST THE TABLE AND GRIETED HIS
TEETH. HE COULDN'T GET IN. COULDN'T
BE STRONGER THAN HER!

SHED CLASPED HER
MIND TO THE ANGRY
HAMMERING AND
MISTERIAL
SOUNDS ON THE
OTHER SIDE.



FOR A MOMENT HE WAS HOPELESSLY
IMMURED IN THE TANGLE OF LIGHT
CORD AND BRANCHES. HIS FRUSTRATED
SCREAMS ECHOED ABOUT THE
GREAT HOUSE.



PAULINE GRABBED UP THE DILAPIDATED
PACKAGE BENEATH THE TREE AND
TOOK AT THE WRAPPINGS

SHE TIPPED APART THE
SMALLER PACKAGE BECAUSE
IT RAVAGED THE SHELLS
INTO THE SHINY BLUE BAGGAGE.



PAUL WAS HACKING HIS WAY
FROM UNDER THE TREE.

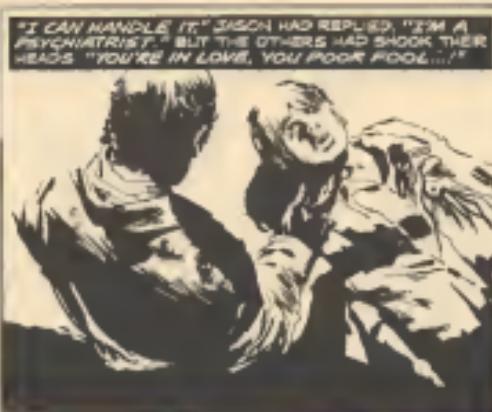
SHE HELD THE WEAPON BEFORE
HER. HANDS SLIPPERY WITH HER
OWN BLOOD. TIME SEEMED TO
HAVE SUSPENDED. A STRANGE
CALM SETTLED OVER HER.



FORGIVE ME,
JASON. IT'S THE
ONLY WAY...



POW
KABOOM



JOHNNY SHIVERSCREEN WHISTLED A
CHERRY CHRISTMAS TUNE UNDER HIS
BREATH AS HE AND HIS YOUNGER
BROTHER, BEN, STRUGGLED THRU
THE SWIRLING SNOW.

...THE BEST
YOU'LL SEE, BEN.
THIS'LL BE THE VERY
BEST CHRISTMAS
EVER!

WHY--
DID HE DO IT,
JOHNNY?

"WHY HE HAVE TO DO
AN' HURT MOMMA?"
HE DUNIT HAVE NO
RIGHT TO DO THAT--
SOM--!

JOHNNY LET THE HOWLING WIND SKITTER MADLY BY. TAKING WITH IT THE
LAST REMAINING FREIGHTMENTS OF HIS HALF-HEARTED SONG, IT HAD TO
POW'MUCH GOOD ANYWAY. THE LUMP IN HIS THROAT WAS STILL AS
BIG AS EVER.

"...I WISH PAPA WAS
STILL ALIVE, JOHNNY.
I REALLY DO...!"

M-MOMMA
WILL BE OK
I'M SURE
S-SHE HELL
BEN...



A GIFT FOR MOMMA

"...WHEN SHE SEES OUR CHRISTMAS TREE, ALL PRETTY AND SHINY AND DECORATED, S-SHE'LL
LAUGH AND LAUGH...JUST...JUST LIKE SNC...USED TO! YOU'LL SEE, BEN. YOU'LL SEE!"

JOHNNY BUNCHED HIS THIN SHOULDERS STIFFLY AGAINST THE BONE-RUMBLING DECEMBER STORM,
AGAINST THE SCREECHING, RAZOR-SHARP WIND AND THE FRIZZING, CLINGING SNOW. HE STAGGERED ON
AND THE AXE WAS HEAVY AND COLD IN HIS ARMS.

AS HEAVY AND AS COLD AS HIS ARMS,
IF ONLY PAPA WAS STILL HERE. HE
WOULD KNOW WHAT TO DO. BUT HE WASN'T
PAPA WAS DEAD, AND MOMMA

JOHNNY BLINKED, FREEZING THE TEARS
FREEZE SOLID AGAINST HIS BALKON, WIND-RAGGED CHEEKS. HE HOPE BEN
WOULDN'T SEE THEM. HE WAS...WAS THE
MAN OF THE FAMILY NOW, HAD BEEN
EVER SINCE HE HAD FOUND MOMMA AND
TOOK THE AXE AND WAITED UNTIL HIS
STEPFATHER LAY IN A DRUNKEN,
SHOOTING STUPOR. AND...

AND TOMORROW...TOMORROW WAS
CHRISTMAS, THE MOST HOLY OF DAYS,
THE MOST MAGICAL TIME OF ALL.
TRudging THROUGH THE KNEE-DEEP
SNOW JOHNNY PRAYED THAT THERE
WAS ENOUGH MAGIC LEFT FOR JUST
ONE MORE MIRACLE.

TRY CAMP, EVENTUALLY TO THE
MINE. THE DESERTED, NEARLY
FORGOTTEN, RUBBLE-FILLED
MINE. CAMP, EVENTUALLY,
TO POPPA...

I... I WONDER
IF HE KNOWS
ABOUT MAMMA,
JOHNNY? —
DO YOU SUS-
PPOSE HE
KNOWS?



POPPA WAS
ABOUT THE SMART-
EST MAN WHAT EVER
LIVED. BURN, I'M SURE
HE KNOWS. I-T'M
SURE HE DOES.

WHEN HE SAW MAMMA BURST
OUT THE BACK DOOR AND RUN
PAST THEM TOWARD THE MINE,
HER FACE WAS PRAWN. HER
LIPS TREMBLED. JOHNNY KNEW
SOMETHING WAS WRONG.

JOHNNY! YOU
AND BETH STAY HERE!
I... I HAVE TO GO TO...
TO THE M-MINE NOW...
— CHOKES —

LORD,
PLEASE... P-DON'T
LET IT BE MAMMA!
OH, PLEASE!



JOHNNY THOUGHT BACK
TO THAT FRIGHTFUL SUM-
MER DAY OVER TWO
YEARS AGO. HEY BOY!
BOY! WHEN HE FIRST
HEARD THE WAILING,
MOURNFUL SIGH-
ING BEARING FROM
THE MINE...



IT WASN'T UNTIL LATER THAT
HE LEARNED JUST WHAT.

A CAVE-IN! TRAPPED
DOWN THERE!



HE LEARNED, HOURS LATER, WHEN
MAMMA CAME WALKING BACK TO
THEM, THAT THEIR POPPA WOULD
NOT... WOULD NEVER COME BACK.

POPPA'S GONE,
CHILDREN—

—HE WAS
IN THE
M-MINE
—



...LEARNED, THEN, ABOUT COAL MINES
OF METHANE GAS AND LAND-
SLIDES. JOHNNY REMEMBERED THAT
POPPA HAD ALWAYS SEEMED SO
POWERRFUL... MUCH LIKE THE
MOUNTAIN HE HAD HELPED BUILT...





JOHNNY REMEM-
BERED HIM RE-
MEMBERED HE'D
NEVER LIKED
HIM MUCH...
EVEN AT FIRST.

POORAH' BEEN GONE OVER
A YEAR WHEN HE STARTED
COMING AROUND... HAD
SHRED BACK TIGHT TO
HIS HEAD, AND SMELLING
OF TOILET WATER...

...AND A COUPLE OF MONTHS LATER
THEY GOT MARRIED. JOHNNY
DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW THIS
STRANGER COULD BECOME HIS
FATHER. BUT AROMA HAD
SAY IT WAS ALL RIGHT...



STILL, JOHNNY COULDN'T HELP REMEMBERING HOW POORAH
HAD ALWAYS SMELLED OF THE COOL, CLEAN EARTH AND RICH,
DARK COAL DUST...



JOHNNY BLINKED. STOOD BACK, WATCHED THE TREE TREMBLE
CRASH HEAVILY TO THE SNOW-COVERED EARTH...

...DEADDEADDEADDEAD...

NEVER OF WHISKEY.







A CHRISTMAS DAWN... A MAGICAL DAWN... STREAKED THE MORNING IN THE TIME JOHNNY AND BEN HAD FINISHED DECORATING THEIR TREE... THEIR WONDERFUL TREE... AND WALKED EXULTANT UP THE CREAKING STAIRWAY, SHOUTING TO...





YES, PERHAPS
IT WAS THAT,
AFTER ALL...



AT ANY RATE, IT WAS NICE
TO SEE POOPA AGAIN...



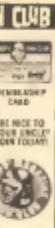
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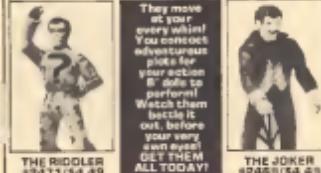
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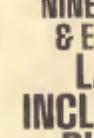
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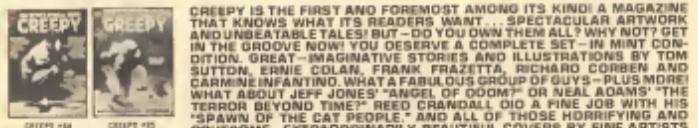
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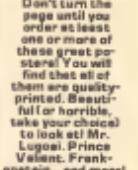
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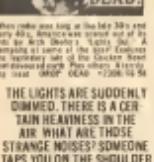
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50 minutes of classic horror action by Hammer. Film 1: "The Blood Countess" and Hammer's "The Human Dracula". Film 2: "The Blood Countess" and Hammer's "The Human Dracula". Film 3: "The Blood Countess" and Hammer's "The Human Dracula". Film 4: "The Blood Countess" and Hammer's "The Human Dracula". Film 5: "The Blood Countess" and Hammer's "The Human Dracula". Film 6: "The Blood Countess" and Hammer's "The Human Dracula". Film 7: "The Blood Countess" and Hammer's "The Human Dracula". Film 8: "The Blood Countess" and Hammer's "The Human Dracula". Film 9: "The Blood Countess" and Hammer's "The Human Dracula". Film 10: "The Blood Countess" and Hammer's "The Human Dracula".

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